

PUPPIES ASSISTING WOUNDED SERVICEMEMBERS (PAWS) ACT OF 2021 – S.XX

Cosponsors: Senators Fischer,

The PAWS Act would establish a 3-year program in which the Secretary of Veterans Affairs would provide grants of up to \$25,000 per veteran to eligible organizations to pair veterans suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with service dogs. In addition to initial pairing costs, the grants would cover: (1) a veterinary health insurance policy for the life of the dog, (2) service dog hardware, and (3) payment for travel expenses for the veteran to obtain the dog.

Although the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) covers service dogs for veterans with physical disabilities, it does not currently cover service dogs for veterans with PTSD, despite evidence of the efficacy of service dogs for this type of treatment.

Eligible Organizations: To be eligible for a VA grant for a service dog pairing, the organization must be a non-profit that is accredited by Assistance Dogs International (ADI), the International Guide Dog Federation (IGDF), or meets the publicly available standards of the Association of Service Dog Providers for Military Veterans (ASDPMV). The Secretary can also authorize an organization to participate in the program if it has accreditation standards that meet or exceeds ADI's or IGDF's. All organizations must also have expertise in the unique needs of veterans with PTSD.

Eligible Veterans: To participate in the program, a veteran must have completed an evidence-based treatment for PTSD, yet remain symptomatic according to the PCL-5 checklist, and receive a determination from a VA healthcare provider/clinical team that he or she would benefit from a service dog. Veterans must also see a health care provider at least twice a year to remain eligible for the program.

Reporting Requirements: The VA must develop metrics to measure a participating veteran's improvement in psychosocial function and therapeutic compliance and changes relating to dependence on prescription narcotics and psychotropic medications.

Funding: The bill would authorize a total of \$10 million to carry out the program from FY 2022 through 2024.

Key Changes to the Text from Last Congress:

- **Updates eligibility criteria for organizations:** Based on feedback from service dog organizations we have modified and broadened the eligibility criteria to include widely respected accreditors, ADI and IGDF, along with maintaining the standards of the ASDPMV, to ensure that veterans have adequate access to highly trained and quality service dogs from reputable service dog organizations across the country.
- **Updates statistics, findings, and sense of Congress:** The bill contains updated statistics and findings from the VA's latest National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, and also contains an updated sense of Congress section that encourages the VA to use all tools at its disposal, including innovative treatments, such as service dogs, to treat veterans with mental health disorders.

Earlier this year, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) released the results of a long awaited study about the effectiveness of service dogs in assisting veterans with PTSD. The study examined the effectiveness of pairing veterans with a service dog versus an emotional support dog over an 18 month period. According to the study's results, on average, veterans paired with a service dog experienced a 3.7 percent improvement on the post-traumatic stress disorder checklist (PCL-5) and also saw a decrease in depression and suicidal measures. We are very excited about the study's results, which demonstrated the positive impact that service dogs can have for our nation's veterans suffering from PTSD, and are hopeful that we can soon enact this important and innovative legislation for our veterans.

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